

# BOWL SUPER

By STEVE HOLGATE

*In an end-of-winter ritual, the Super Bowl of American football seizes the nation's attention.*

Every year toward the end of winter, when much of the country still sits in an icebox, Americans take time in the warmth of their homes to enjoy the greatest spectacle in American sports, the Super Bowl of professional football. The championship game presents a heady blend to viewers—part circus, part ritual and part gladiatorial contest. And they eat it up. More than 100 million Americans watch the game, making it the most-watched regular television event of the year. Across the country, deserted streets, empty stores and the blue glow one might see through most living room windows while walking down a residential street testify to the pop-

ularity of this event. For those lucky few tens of thousands who actually attend, tickets can cost more than \$1,000 each.

No political, cultural or entertainment event can compete with the Super Bowl for the scale of its one-day impact. Thousands of journalists from across the country head to the game—which was played this year in Detroit, Michigan, on February 5. The entertainment staged before the game and at its halfway mark feature some of the biggest celebrities in show business. Major television advertisers spend tens of millions of dollars to present their products in spectacular and expensively-produced commercials, each one trying to top the next in special effects

and cleverness, to the point that some people claim to watch the game mainly to see the ads.

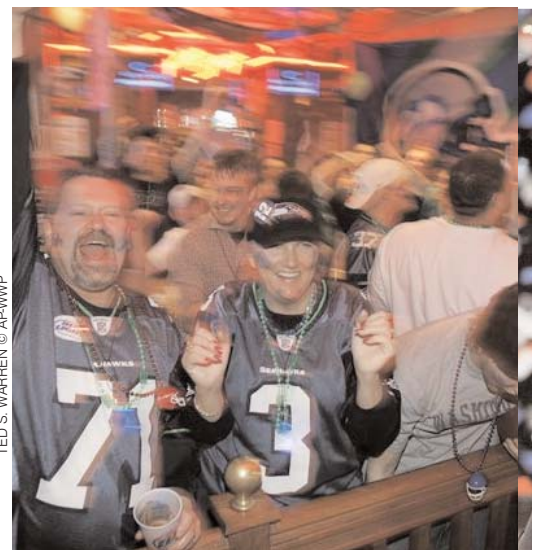
Somewhere amidst the marching bands, dancers, jet plane fly-overs, singers, advertisements and other hoopla, a football game is played.

The Super Bowl culminates a football

*Above, left: The Black Eyed Peas and Earth, Wind and Fire rock bands perform at the Super Bowl in Jacksonville, Florida, in 2005.*

*Below, left: The Rolling Stones' halftime show at the 40th Super Bowl game played in Detroit on February 5, 2006.*

*Below: Seattle Seahawks fans cheer at a bar in Washington state during the 2006 game.*





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*Left: Pittsburgh Steelers' Jerome Bettis holds up the Vince Lombardi Trophy after defeating the Seattle Seahawks 21-10.*

*Above: Seattle Seahawks tight end Jerramy Stevens drops the pass as Pittsburgh Steelers safety Chris Hope makes a tackle at the Super Bowl game in Detroit on February 5, 2006.*





*Left: The New England Patriots, champions of Super Bowl 2005, parade in Boston after beating the Philadelphia Eagles 24-21.*

*Below: Former Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton greet fans prior to the Super Bowl in Jacksonville, Florida, on February 6, 2005.*



season that begins in the heat of late summer, continues through the snows of winter—games are frequently played in snowstorms and with temperatures many degrees below freezing—and ends with a breath of springtime in the air. Fans follow their teams with an almost fanatical enthusiasm, planning their week around the live broadcasts of the games, usually played on Sunday afternoons. Many fans have bought televisions with special split-screen features that allow them to watch two or more games simultaneously. The dramatic growth in football's popularity since the 1960s has adherents claiming that it, not baseball, is America's preeminent sport.

Though closely related to the British game of rugby, football remains a peculiarly American tradition. It has not achieved the international popularity of other sports born in the USA. Professional baseball thrives in Japan, Australia and throughout much of Latin America. Basketball has reached almost every corner of the world. Yet, football remains almost strictly American. Yes, there is a professional league in Canada, but almost all of its players come from the United States, and all but a couple of the teams are located no more than a short drive from the American border.

Virtually all large American cities boast a professional team. (The peculiar excep-

tion is Los Angeles, the second-largest city in the nation, which has none.)

The football teams of hundreds of universities and colleges represent the heart and spirit of the schools. University alumni speak of the exploits of old-time heroes of the great school teams with the same awe and wonder as ancients spoke of Odysseus or Gilgamesh.

Most high schools have football teams, and the sport has even trickled down into grade schools, where the protective equipment required of players dwarfs the pint-size players, who practically disappear into their uniforms.

Politicians like to use football metaphors in speeches to give them a manly and assertive tone. Famous players peer from television screens, billboards and magazine pages, lending their names to the marketing of everything from ice tea to pickup trucks. Though it is a particularly masculine game, many American wives have learned to enjoy football, partly for its excitement and color and partly to avoid becoming "football widows," a term coined to describe women whose husbands submerge themselves in

the game each September, not to surface again until after the Super Bowl.

Some, mostly intellectuals, sniff at football's showy extravagance and its bone-crushing style. For most Americans, though, football's cultivation of quick thinking, determination, courage and the will to excel make it a crucible of strong character.

Though it bursts with action and its play can reflect a computer-like complexity, the essentials of the game are not difficult to understand. Essentially, a team of 11 players will try to advance the football down the length of the 100-yard [91.4-meter] field and across a goal line at the end. On each play, the offensive team's key player, the quarterback, hands off or throws the ball to a teammate who tries to advance himself and the ball as far down the field as possible. The defensive team tries to knock him to the ground as soon as possible. It's pretty much that simple.

It is a physically challenging sport, even brutal at times. Imagine soccer if, every time you got the ball, a group of 90-kilogram giants tried to crash into you and throw you to the ground.

These physical challenges long ago led football officials at all levels to permit teams to play only one game per week. This measured advance of the season adds to the unique flavor of the game, as the teams—and their fans—build up to a peak of emotional intensity, culminating on the day of the game in a catharsis and release that is one of the game's most satisfying attributes.

Though professional football has many cherished traditions and storied players, the Super Bowl is not played under the foggy lens of the past, as are some sports. It is alive and kinetic and emotional, living right here and right now. The Super Bowl is the acme of the professional spirit of the game. And the country, freed for a couple of hours from the politeness and niceties that form the backbone of America's strong communities and civil society, watches, fascinated. □

**About the Author:** *Steve Holgate recently retired as a correspondent for Washington File, published by the Bureau of International Information Programs of the U.S. Department of State.*